

SIMPLICITY OF GOD ACCORDING TO ST GREGORY PALAMAS¹

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The Primary attribute of God is simplicity. If God is not simple but composite of different parts, then these parts must precede God. Yet a God like this cannot be a cause and creator of anything. He is not a real God, the beginning of everything. As the beginning of everything, God must not be composite but simple.

In addition, he is not *only* simple: *καί τῶν ἀπλουμένων ἀπλότης καί τῶν ἐνιζομένων ἐνότης* (“...and of simplicity to them that are being brought into simplicity; and of unity to them that are being brought into unity”; Dionysius the Areopagite, *Περί θείων ὀνομάτων* 1,3; PG 3,589C). Thus, without him coming out of his simplicity which is without parts, he is present as a whole, being without parts and unable to be divided into parts (*ἀμερῶς τε καί ἀμερίστως*) in all and each of the beings He creates (Maximus the Confessor, *Περί ἀποριῶν*, PG 91,1257B). God, says Saint Gregory Palamas, is not some large physical body, that because of His size is unable to fit into a small space, and He is not restricted in a (quantifiable and physical) body. Therefore, he can be everywhere and over everything and inside anything (*καί πανταχοῦ δύναται εἶναι καί ὑπέρ τό πᾶν καί ἐν ἐνί*). And if someone brings in mind the smallest thing, He can also fit into it His whole existence (*Διάλεξις πρὸς Χιόνας*, *Lecture to Chionas*, 12; Χρήστου 1988, p.159).

Man is not simple but composite. And this is not primarily due to his being composed of body and soul or due to his having several elements and organs, but due to his having many needs, he is always in need of something. His existence and preservation has a need of things that are outside himself. For this reason, he also needs many senses, so that he can come in contact with these things, know them, acquire them and benefit from them.

In addition, God is not simple nor non-composite as an undifferentiated

¹ Translated by Demetrios Kontoudis; corrected and edited by C. Athanasopoulos.

substance or as *καθαρά ἐνέργεια* (pure *energeia*), the way Aristotle understood it and, in part, scholastic theology [in the way of *actus purus*]. This philosophical concept of simplicity, as applied to God, is foreign to the Biblical and Patristic tradition. God is simple because he is without any needs (*ἀπροσδεής*), because he has no need of addition [nor change]. The initial letter of the word *ἀπλός* (simple) is an indication of addition and affirmation and not of deprivation (as is the case of other uses of “α-” prefix in Greek words, for example, *aporetic*, from *απορία*). Thus, we also see that in the *New Testament*, simple (*ἀπλός*) is the one who is whole, generous, in contrast with the *πονηρός* (evil) or *δίψυχος* (double minded), as, for example, in *Mat.* 6,22-23. *Jam.* 1,5-8.

God is simple, although He is Triune. He is simple, although He is distinguished in persons and energy. He is simple, although He is simultaneously accessible and inaccessible. It could also be said that God is simple because He is Triune and because He is discerned in essence and energy: “God is one in essence and energy, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (*Ἐν οὐσία γάρ καὶ ἐνεργείᾳ εἷς ἐστὶ Θεός· ὁ Πατήρ καὶ ὁ Υἱός καὶ τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον*; see *Διάλογος Ὁρθοδόξου μετὰ Βαρλααμίτου* 37 and 50; in Χρήστου, 1966, p. 200 and p. 212). He also is simple, because He can be simultaneously accessible and inaccessible: “God can be multiplied while remaining one and can give Himself or be communion with in many ways, while remaining without parts in any conceivable way, and He has this unity within Himself by supra-essential power” (*Ὁ Θεός καὶ πληθύνεται μένων εἷς καὶ μερίζεται μένων ἀμερῆς, καὶ μετέχεται ποικίλως ἄτμητος ὧν πάντα καὶ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ἐνότητος ἐχόμενος ἀνεκφοιτήτως καθ’ ὑπερούσιον δύναμιν*; in *Περὶ θείας καὶ θεοποιῶς μεθέξεως* 23; Χρήστου, 1966, p.157).

Ultimately, God is simple because He is omnipotent, passionless and without need. The ones that are powerful, as Saint Gregory Palamas notes, are the most simple and the all-powerful one is the simplest (*Διάλογος Ὁρθοδόξου μετὰ Βαρλααμίτου*, 53; in Χρήστου, 1966, p.215). The blessed Symeon the New Theologian also writes: “God, the cause of everything, is one. And this one is light and life, spirit and logos, mouth and word...” (*Ὁ Θεός ἡ τῶν ὅλων αἰτία εἷς ἐστὶ· τὸ δὲ ἐν τούτῳ φῶς καὶ ζωὴ ἐστὶ, πνεῦμα καὶ λόγος, στόμα καὶ ῥῆμα...*) And when a man has a sense in a soul and mind (*nous*) and word (*logos*), even if this one is due to natural needs, this sense can be divided in terms of its origin to five. All these senses converge and conclude to the mind (*nous*) that rules over them: it is the mind/*nous* that sees and the mind/*nous* that listens (*νοῦς ὁρᾷ καὶ νοῦς ἀκούει*; Symeon the New Theologian, *Ἡθικός λόγος*, 3,7).

God is light according to the Blessed Symeon: “The Father is light, the

Son is light, the Holy Spirit is light. In them a light simple, not created, timeless, co-eternal, with same honor and same glory” (*Ὁ Πατήρ φῶς ἐστίν, ὁ Υἱὸς φῶς ἐστί, τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον φῶς· ἔν ταῦτα φῶς ἀπλοῦν, ἀσύνθετον, ἄχρονον, συναῖδιον, ὁμότιμον καὶ ὁμόδοξον*; Symeon the New Theologian, *Θεολογικός* 3,141-143). And Saint Gregory Palamas writes that this divine light is not only given as undivided to the ones who see it or participate in its glory, but it also has a unifying and deifying power. And, as such, this power unites and lifts those that participate in it, always according to their receptivity, towards the unity and deifying simplicity of the Father (*Περὶ θείας καὶ θεοποιουῦ μεθέξεως*, 6; Χρήστου, 1966, p.141-142). The essence (*οὐσία*) of God is without ceasing and remains always inaccessible (*ἀμέθεκτη*) and simple; it is in this way, as Palamas observes, that His energies are being imparted on the creatures. And while those that partake are created and have a beginning, the divine energies that are being partaken are multifarious, uncreated and everlasting, and are “joined together eternally with the everlasting omnipotent and self-contained God and Ruler of everything” (*συνημμέναι αἰδίως τῷ ἐξ αἰδίου παντοδυνάμῳ καὶ αὐτοτελεῖ Θεῷ καὶ Δεσπότῃ τοῦ παντός; Περὶ θείων ἐνεργειῶν*, 40-41; Χρήστου, 1966, pp.125-126). In a similar way, the simple white light in nature contains all possible variations of colours.

While simplicity is connected with omnipotence and fullness, composition is the result of weakness and destitution. When something is not able to exist and be preserved by itself, it is led necessarily to composition. According to Saint Gregory Palamas, all things that can be found in nature are composite, because they cannot sustain themselves on their own, and they are born as composite for the same reason (*Ἐκ γὰρ τοῦ μὴ δύνασθαι καθ' ἑαυτὸ τι τῶν γενητῶν μονοειδῶς καὶ ἀμιγῶς παντάπασιν εἶναι τε καὶ ὑφεστάναι, τῆς πρὸς ἕτερον ἐξ ἀνάγκης δεῖται συμπλοκῆς, διό καὶ τῇ γενέσει σύνθετον εὐθύς ἀπετελέσθη* (*Διάλογος Ὁρθοδόξου μετὰ Βαρλααμίτου*, 53; Χρήστου, 1966, p.215). God exists as a Being in itself and disposes Himself to all without sharing anything with them. The ones that are created don't exist as beings in themselves, but as ones that partake being and as ones that have the need for being.

Truth also is congenital with simplicity, as Didymus from Alexandria briefly notes: truth “is congenital with simplicity” (*συμπέφυκεν τῇ ἀπλότητι*; Didymus of Alexandria, *Περὶ Τριάδος* 3,1, PG 39,780D). Divine truth is simple and absolute, while man's truth is multi-faceted and relative. The more someone approaches divine truth, the more he approaches divine simplicity. This simplicity is neither poverty nor naivety; it is richness and wisdom, self-sufficiency and completeness. Simplicity again, is the absence of any deficiency, of any passion, of any

lack; it is the absence of any need for supplementation.

In the end, God's simplicity is related to impassivity. Of course, divine impassivity has no relation to the deliverance from passions, as it is with human [acquired] impassivity. God is impassive because He acts without passion. He provides all without receiving anything. All that God has, writes Saint Gregory, He has them as acting only and not as receiving any action in Himself (*ὡς ἐνεργῶν μόνον, ἀλλ' οὐχί πάσχων κατ' αὐτά* - *Περὶ θείας καὶ θεοποιῶς μεθέξεως*, 26; Χρήστου, 1966, p.159). On the contrary, man doesn't only act but he also suffers. In this way, man's mind (*nous*) has externally the ability to think, because he acquires it with an experience or teaching, that is with suffering or a passion. So, the perfection of man that coincides with his deification is not the fruit of an action, but of a suffering or a passion. It is not the same though with God. He doesn't acquire wisdom through suffering or passion, because he assumes nothing. God is the same always and with His energies, He is revealed as He is. This is valid not only for the Father, but for the Son and for the Holy Spirit as well (*Διάλογος Ὁρθοδόξου μετὰ Βαρλααμίτου*, 40; Χρήστου, 1966, p.203).

God is simple by His own nature. But simplicity is not God's nature. Simplicity, Palamas observes, is one of the divine energies (*μία τῶν θείων ἐνεργειῶν*). This means that it becomes participable, without offending the imparticipability of divine essence (*ousia*). Therefore, with their participation to the simplicity of God, angels and souls become simple (Gregory Palamas, *Πρὸς Δανιὴλ Αἴνου* 9, Χρήστου, 1966, p.383; *Διάλογος Ὁρθοδόξου μετὰ Βαρλααμίτου*, 36; Χρήστου, 1966, p. 199; also see Γρηγορίου Θεολόγου, *Λόγος εἰς τὰ Θεοφάνια*, 7, PG 36,317D).

Saint Gregory Palamas' opponents, by claiming that he cannot admit simplicity of God in his theological system, they didn't only use his teaching about the discernment between essence (*ousia*) and energy (*energia*), but they also explicitly accused St Gregory Palamas of admitting multiple divinities, in addition to the Triune God. They did not hesitate to resort to counterfeiting his texts, in order to support their own claim. Thus, through the published work of monk Nephon the Candidate, under the assumed name of Demetrios Kydones (and which one can find in *Patrologiae Graeca* and has a strong polemic anti-hesychastic character), there is cited the following passage which is portrayed as Palamas' text: "One is the divinity of the three substances; that is, its nature and essence is supra-essential, simple, invisible, incomprehensible, and imparticipable in any way; all other divinities that are called 'God' by the saints, they can either be one or two or more" (*Μία ἐστὶ τῶν τριῶν ὑποστάσεων θεότης, ἥτοι φύσις καὶ οὐσία ὑπερουσίος, ἀπλῆ, ἀόρατος,*

ἀπερινόητος, ἀμέθεκτος παντάπασιν. Αἱ δὲ ἄλλαι παρά τῶν ἁγίων λεγόμεναι θεότητες, εἴτε μία, εἴτε δύο, εἴτε πλείους; Κατά τοῦ Παλαμᾶ, PG 154, 848BC).

But the original passage, which one can find in Palamas' writings is totally different; in addition. it explicitly discards the multiplication of divinities. The actual passage reads:

“One is the divinity of the three substances; that is, its nature and essence is supra-essential, simple, invisible, imparticipable, incomprehensible in any way; if one of the other energies is called divine by the saints, whether one, or two or more... all these are called processions and expressions and powers and energies of the one divinity (that I mentioned above) and naturally they come out of this divinity and without subtracting anything from it” (*Μία γάρ ἐστι τῶν τριῶν ὑποστάσεων θεότης, ἥτοι φύσις καὶ οὐσία ὑπερουσίος, ἀπλῆ, ὁράτος, ἀμέθεκτος, παντάπασιν ἀπερινόητος. Εἰ δέ τις ἄλλη τῶν ἐνεργειῶν παρά τῶν ἁγίων λέγοιτο θεότης, εἴτε μία, εἴτε δύο, εἴτε πλείους... ταῦτα τοίνυν ἅπαντα πρόοδοί εἰσι καὶ ἐκφάνσεις καὶ δυνάμεις καὶ ἐνέργειαι τῆς μιᾶς θεότητος ἐκείνης, φυσικῶς προσοῦσαι ταύτῃ καὶ ἀναφαιρέτως; Διάλογος Ὁρθοδόξου μετὰ Βαρλααμίτου, 27; Χρήστου, 1966, p. 189-190; more on this in Μαντζαρίδη, 1998, pp.248-250).*

Only God can be absolutely simple, who also is the source of every simplicity. The simple creatures, like angels or the souls of men, are not totally simple neither are they simple by their nature. Their simplicity is secondary and relative. They become and are referred to as “simple” according to their participation in the divine simplicity and in comparison to material bodies (which are not simple). For this reason, sometimes they are presented simple and other times not, depending on their states, their passions, and the corruption that they suffer. But God is not simple by comparison (*ἀπό συγκρίσεως*) or by communion (*ἀπό μεθέξεως*), but by Himself and as the transmitter of simplicity; He is the “one who imparts from himself simplicity properly to each” (*ὁ καταλλήλως παρ’ ἑαυτοῦ μεταδίδους ἐκάστῳ τῆς ἀπλότητος; Διάλογος Ὁρθοδόξου μετὰ Βαρλααμίτου, 55; Χρήστου, 1966, p.216).*

Simplicity, according to Saint Gregory Palamas, and according to the tradition of the Orthodox Church in general, has not only a theological importance, but also a soteriological one. Salvation of man itself is accomplished by man’s elevation to simplicity. The uncontrollable fragmentation, in which man has fallen through his disobedience to the divine will, is healed through the restoration of his unity, which, ultimately, is his elevation to the fullness of divine simplicity. This work, which was established by Christ through His incarnation, every Christian is called to imitate by observing the commandments.

Christ is the new Adam, the new creation. As the non-composite Logos of God assumed in His hypostasis the composite human nature, He gave to it the ability to lead the whole of creation unto the unity of divine simplicity. In that way, man as the conjunction or partaker of everything (ὡς συνδρομή τοῦ παντός) and recapitulation (or summation) of God's creatures (ἀνακεφαλαίωσις τῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ κτισμάτων; Ὁμιλία 53, 35; Οἰκονόμου, 1861, σ. 172), and with his single composite psychosomatic nature has the unique -among the creatures- privilege to unify and to offer in Divine Eucharist, through one's participation in it, the whole of creation to God.

The whole hesychastic tradition that Saint Gregory Palamas defended is characterized by the movement towards the anthropological and the cosmological unity and simplicity and is supported by a significant theological foundation. Man as created, made in God's image and after God's likeness, is also an icon of divine simplicity. But divine simplicity, as any other divine characteristic, is maintained and perfected in man only with his participation in the divine energy and life. Although man is composite as any being in need, he is called during his lifetime to claim as his own and to assimilate the divine life and the divine simplicity as a charismatic fullness.

This assimilation that initiates the deification of man and the salvation of the whole world is accomplished by the grace of God and by the ascetic struggle of man. Human mind (*nous*) at first, as it is exalted towards the first Mind or nous (πρῶτον Νοῦν), accepts according to its receptivity the betrothal of the good things that will come (τόν ἀρραβῶνα τῶν μελλόντων ἀγαθῶν). In this way, he is himself altered and through himself alters: "the attached body towards the one that is more divine... foreshadowing the swallowing of the flesh by the spirit in the age that will come" (τό συνημμένον σῶμα πρὸς τό θεϊότερον... προοιμιαζόμενος τήν ὑπό τοῦ πνεύματος ἐπὶ τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος τῆς σαρκὸς κατάποσιν -Ὑπέρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων 1,3,33; Χρήστου, 1962, p.444). This alteration does not have a theoretical character, but an empirical one. It is not accomplished with the used perceptible way, but becomes perceived supra-perceptibly (ὑπεραισθητῶς αἰσθητή -Ὑπέρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων 1,2,3; Χρήστου, 1962, p.396). The perception of the good things that will come (αἰσθησις τῶν μελλόντων ἀγαθῶν) is experienced by man spiritually with the so called "spiritual" or "mental" senses. All these senses are summed up into one spiritual or mental sense that is termed thus, because it exceeds and excesses any natural sense.

The man that is away from God is moving towards a continuously increasing fragmentation that is corroding his personal and social life. As

he remains in this situation, he is unable to become fulfilled as a person and to approach the fullness of divine simplicity that he is an icon of. As God is simple and non-composite, he also wants the souls that are approaching him to be simple and pure (*Υπέρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων* 1,2,3; Χρήστου, 1962, p.396). This approach starts with contemplation and the return of the mind (*nous*) into the heart, which according to Saint Gregory Palamas constitutes the “inner chamber of thoughts” (*τό τῶν λογισμῶν ταμεῖον* -*Υπέρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων* 1,2,3; Χρήστου, 1962, p.396).

When man remains focused on the tangible and corruptible, then his mind (*nous*) also becomes carnal. But when the mind (*nous*) returns into the heart and is exalted to God, then the flesh also is co-exalted with him. It is altered and it becomes a “house of God” (*οἶκημα Θεοῦ* -*Υπέρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων* 1,2,9; Χρήστου, 1962, p.402). The hesychastic life with the one-sentenced prayer [“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me the sinner”], attends the return of the mind into the heart. This is accomplished with the *synergy* of divine grace and makes the man lord over his own self. In that way, he is unified and hence, he can direct his whole existence to God by applying the first and greatest command: “thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength” (*ἀγαπήσεις Κύριον τόν Θεόν σου ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καί ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς σου καί ἐξ ὅλης τῆς διανοίας σου καί ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ἰσχύος σου* -*Mark*. 12,30; also see *Mat*. 22,37).

The body does not hinder the movement of man towards divine simplicity. On the contrary, it can be offered as a “place” (*τόπος*) of approaching it. This is confirmed and not denied by the hesychastic movement. Quoting the Blessed John of Sinai, Palamas writes: “hesychast is the one that hastily confines the bodiless in the body” (*ἡσυχαστής ἐστίν ὁ τό ἀσώματον ἐν σώματι περιορίζειν σπεύδων* -*Υπέρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων* 1,2,6; Χρήστου, 1962, p.399; Ιωάννης, *Κλίμαξ*, 27,5). This awkward and paradox work unifies man and prepares his deification. Therefore, the whole hesychastic life is oriented towards the unification of man: unification of the fragmented mind (*nous*), collection of his immaterial mind inside the body, concentration of the whole man inside his inner body that is called heart (*Υπέρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων* 1,2,3; Χρήστου, 1962, p.396). This unification effort becomes particularly effective through the one-sentenced prayer. As the simple God, to restore man to himself, He offers only one sentence, in the same way, the man, who seeks the unifying (*ενοποιός*) simplicity, refers to God with a one-sentenced prayer (Αρχιμανδρίτης Ζαχαρίας, 2012, p.385 and after).

God loves man. He does not want man to be divided; He wants him whole. And, only when the broken and divided by sin and passions man is unified, he can stand in front his Creator and respond to His command. When man concentrates into himself and unto God, he becomes one spirit with God (ἐν πνεῦμα ἐν Κυρίῳ). He is connected with the *Logos* God, unto whom, in an incomprehensible simplicity, he becomes of a single and universal form and transcends every division; this affirms Saint Maximus the Confessor's belief that the *logoi* of beings exist and are sustained in a simple and unified way (ἐνοειδῶς καί εἰσι καί ὁφεισθήκασιν; Maximus the Confessor, *Μυσταγωγία* 5, PG 91,681B). This vertical unity is also followed by the horizontal embrace in love of the whole world, unifying it. So, unity essentially becomes synonymous with simplicity. Man is unified, embraces the whole creation and refers (ἀναφέρει) Creation together with himself unto God, in that way manifesting his being made in God's image (κατ' εἰκόνα Θεοῦ) in its fullness (Πρός Ξένην 59, Χρήστου 1992, p.224).

The place that man and God meet is the heart of man. According to the typical illustration of the book of *Revelation*, Christ stands at the door and knocks. If someone listens to his voice and opens the door, he will enter and dine with him (Rev. 3,20). When the believer is actually united with Christ, then, as Apostle Paul writes, he acquires "the mind of Christ" (νοὺν Χριστοῦ; 1 Cor. 2,16) or, as Saint Gregory Palamas notes: "Christ is being befitted as a preceding or ruling member of man" (ὡς μέλος ἡγεμονικόν - Ὑπέρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζόντων 1,3,16; Χρήστου 1962, p.426). Thus, he beholds the spiritual things, according to the measure with which he makes his mind (*nous*) receptive of divine enlightenment (*Ibid*).

God's truth doesn't accept partition or division, but is divided indivisibly and is partaken without any division. And the spiritual sense of His truth is approached from man with divine enlightenment, when he has his mind clear from passions. This sense (which is both spiritual and not spiritual) becomes immediately perceptible, not only as the perception of the sensible, but more intensely (Ὅρᾳ γάρ, οὐκ αἰσθήσει μὲν, ὡς ἡ αἴσθησις δέ τὰ αἰσθητά τρανῶς καὶ τρανότερον ἢ αὐτὴ - Ὑπέρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζόντων 1,3,21; Χρήστου 1962, p.432). In this way, man is coming out of the cosmic fracture and multiplicity and partakes to the divine unity and simplicity. The completion of this participation is reserved in the age to come, where God united with each of the deified will have one energy with them (Πρός Γαβριᾶν 29, Χρήστου 1966, p.357; also see Maximus the Confessor, *Περὶ ἀποριῶν*, PG 91,1076C).

This unity characterizes the Church as the body of Christ and as a community of deification. The Church is one. And the unity of the Church, as catholicity and wholeness, coincides with its truth and simplicity. As

Saint Gregory Palamas notes: “the people of the Church of Christ are of the truth; the ones that are not of the truth, they are not of the Church of Christ either” (*οἱ τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἀληθείας εἰσὶ καὶ οἱ μὴ τῆς ἀληθείας ὄντες οὐδέ τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἐκκλησίας εἰσὶν -Αναίρεσις γράμματος Ἰγνατίου 3; Χρήστου 1966, p.627*). The truth also is simplicity; it cannot be divided, neither can it be subtracted. The one which is true is one (ἕν), while the lie is multi-faceted (*ψεῦδος πολυσχιδές -Maximus the Confessor, Κεφάλαια θεολογικά, PG 91,1076B*). Simplicity, as an uncreated energy of the God of Truth, embraces the whole creation, and through man, who stands at the borderline of the material and the spiritual world, directs everything towards the simplifying unity, towards their fulfillment in God.

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